

IN THE NATION | Tom Wicker

Bush and the C.I.A.

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Have American voters really thought about the implications of electing a President who once was Director of the C.I.A. and who later attended all the high-level meetings at which the most damning failure of the Reagan Administration was perpetrated?

These questions about Vice President Bush, the heavy favorite to win over Michael Dukakis next Tuesday, transcend the specific issue of how much he knew about the drug trafficking and other criminal activities of the C.I.A.'s paid "asset," Gen. Manuel Noriega of Panama. As the agency's Director, Mr. Bush met with General Noriega and later worked against prosecuting him on charges of having bribed U.S. servicemen in a national security case.

Mr. Bush says he knew nothing of General Noriega's criminality. That's the same defense he pleads in the case of the Reagan Administration's arms-for-hostages dealings with Iran. In both instances, either he did know, to his discredit, and is lying now; or he did not know, which means he was inattentive and ineffective in the jobs he boasts of having held.

More important is the fact emblazoned on Mr. Bush's much-ballyhooed résumé: That he was, indeed, Director of Central Intelligence during the Ford Administration. If elected Tuesday, he will be the first occupant of that sensitive, secretive and sometimes compromised post ever to win the White House, or to aspire to it, or even to become active in elective politics. The directorship has been, and should be, a non-partisan and nonpolitical office; to use it as a stepping stone to the Presidency sets a dangerous precedent for the future — for the C.I.A. as well as for the nation.

A former chief of U.S. covert action in the Presidency, moreover, could raise sharp and damaging problems from the past. The agency, over the years, has earned an unenviable reputation among other nations — particularly in the third world — for political meddling, subversion of governments, parties and politicians, dealings with crooks and dictators like General Noriega, setting cold war advantage over local interests, and frequent violence. Mr. Bush once presided over all that — a fact that lends itself to exploitation by those who wish this country no good.

Who knows, moreover, what future

revelation about such past activities might yet blacken Mr. Bush's name in this country as well as in others where the C.I.A. is hated and feared? It's all very well to say that covert actions are necessary, though that's a dubious proposition; but the reason they're supposed to be "covert" is that no one wants publicly to acknowledge them or to have had a hand in them; Presidents never do, or should.

Perhaps worse, involvement in such international skulduggery — even administrative, and at a distance — might make a future C.I.A. director subject to blackmail from within or without. National leaders and other important officials often have shown themselves as unprincipled and unsavory as General Noriega. The possibility exists that someone — perhaps Mr. Noriega himself — might someday be able to control or influence the actions of a President who once had been chief of U.S. covert activities.

As for the arms-for-hostages dealings with Iran, records show that, as Vice President, Mr. Bush was present at all the high-level meetings, including the one at which George Shultz, the Secretary of State, denounced the whole disreputable scheme. Mr. Bush insists he didn't understand what was going on, but it's equally plausible, if not more so,

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to suggest that a Vice President who had headed the C.I.A. and given it a green light for covert action in fact supported Ronald Reagan's secret dealings with Iran and believed that they would work.

That George Bush has never condemned the arms-to-Iran deal as anything worse than a "mistake" hardly suggests that he has learned to be wary of covert action. As President, the greater possibility is that he will once again give his old comrades of the C.I.A. the green light for their secret, dangerous, often harebrained schemes.

In this important state, as in others, Michael Dukakis is reported — not certified — to be gaining; if so, it's because he's finally gotten off the defensive and is waging a fighting campaign, not only striking back at Mr. Bush's distortions and demagoguery but appealing to the long liberal tradition of the Democratic Party.

That probably won't be enough, if voters continue to see George Bush's vaunted "experience" as an asset for the Presidency rather than the disqualifying record it ought to be. □

Should any ex-director be President?